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ABSTRACT

Students exhibiting poor academic performance can be grouped into three categories: those with limited access to the curriculum, those with little interest in traditional schoolwork, and those with low ability. This report lists typical characteristics of students of these types, offers some possible solutions to their performance problems, and suggests a process teachers could use for improving student performance. The process involves developing interventions jointly with colleagues, testing the interventions, requesting peer observations when interventions fail, and seeking involvement by administrators, parents, and students if additional intervention attempts prove unsuccessful. (PGD)

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POOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: WHO ARE THE STUDENTS? WHAT DO THEY NEED?

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REACH

REALISTIC EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT CAN HAPPEN

EA 018 878

"The educability of students derives far more from the nature of the school to which they are sent than it derives from the nature of the families from which they come."

—Ron Edmonds

State Board of Education Rule (19 TAC 75.2) acknowledges school responsibility to provide a well-balanced curriculum and to deliver effective instruction to all students. Where students have identified needs, districts are required to modify methodology, pacing, and materials to ensure effective instruction.

When students do not master the curriculum, the tendency is to blame factors outside the school's control: the family, environment, student attitudes, or abilities, for example. Although studies done in the 1960s linked low achievement to environmental factors, more recent studies of school effectiveness demonstrate the power of the school to control learning.

Schools would have a relatively easy job if all students doing poorly had the same characteristics and needs. But, unfortunately, there are almost as many reasons for poor performance as there are students.

Attempts to ameliorate problems in a general way have little or no impact on student success. And classes that amass large numbers of problem students place an unfair, unrealistic burden on teachers and students alike. No one wins.

What helps these students learn? The research indicates that before educators attempt to find solutions to the problems of these students, it is important to note their characteristics. California psychologist Ed de Avila groups low performers into three categories: (1) students with limited access to the curriculum, (2) students with little interest in traditional schoolwork, and (3) students with low ability. A broad profile of these students and possible solutions to their school-related problems follow:

Students with lack of access

Characteristics

- achievement scores are poor
- lacks basic, prerequisite skills
- highly mobile or has had limited opportunity to attend school
- victim of poor teaching
- differs in culture, lifestyle, and language

Solutions

- test for limited English proficiency and assign to bilingual education or ESL
- identify specific skill deficits
- concentrate curriculum on skill deficits
- reduce teacher-pupil ratio
- emphasize problem-solving, not rote memory
- emphasize question-and-answer techniques
- teach concepts, not labels
- use experience-based strategies
- secure tutoring or supplementary instruction
- emphasize group participation and cooperation
- de-emphasize competition
- place in school program that accommodates differences among students

Students with low motivation

Characteristics

- retained in grade at least once
- intellectual ability usually average or high
- has poor reading and math skills
- dislikes school
- can't see the benefits of education
- discipline problems are frequent
- attendance is poor
- uninvolved in extracurricular activities
- may have physical illness
- works for economic reasons
- lacks positive relationship with peers and teachers
- family values differ from school values
- doesn't feel in control of own success

Solutions

- place in caring school and classroom atmosphere
- work with teachers who relate to whole student, not just academically
- provide variety of high-interest materials
- vary instructional modes
- assign experience-based activities
- use contract activity packages
- pair with buddy for projects
- check hearing and vision
- provide individual or group counseling programs
- provide career guidance
- place in programs with flexible schedules
- provide job opportunities
- reward academic achievement in meaningful ways
- use variety of standards to judge school success, e.g., artistic accomplishment

Students with low ability

Characteristics

- poor or failing grades
- TEAMS objectives are unmastered
- works hard but not up to expectations
- may attend tutorials or ask for extra help
- has good attendance record
- ineligible for special education
- parents are supportive

Solutions

- analyze learning problems
- provide tutoring or extra help in class
- break learning objectives into smaller steps

- provide programmed learning and contract activity packages
- provide frequent, direct interaction with teacher and immediate feedback
- supply taped texts and materials, pair with a buddy to compensate for reading problems or language limitations
- match teaching style with style of the learner

The process outlined in figure 1 provides a sample of how teachers might solve the problems faced by the three groups of low-achieving students discussed in this article. Teachers are crucial to the process because they must be alert to potential problems and open to consulting with colleagues and support staff to resolve them.

In the first stage, the teacher tries an intervention developed jointly with colleagues. If unsuccessful, the teacher invites colleagues to observe the class and a collective solution is based on this additional data. Finally, in the third stage, the teacher calls on the principal, the student's family, and perhaps the student, to consider solutions beyond the responsibility of individual teachers.

The findings summarized here, while not inclusive of all studies reviewed, will interest persons exploring or involved in school improvement efforts. Suggested solutions to learning problems can stimulate discussion of instructional issues, guide the development of appropriate local improvements and aid in decision-making as improvements take place. Many variables affect the choice of programs that are available to assist low-achieving students. Most of these variables are within the control of the school community.

Readings

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REACH

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GE6 300 05

New curriculum rules adopted by the State Board of Education in June 1986 require districts to provide alternative strategies or programs that will help low-achieving students succeed in school. REACH is intended to provide technical assistance information to complement this new district responsibility. Booklets describing successful models of alternative approaches to learning will be distributed during the 1986-87 school year. For information about this publication, contact the Division of Exemplary Programs, Texas Education Agency, at (512) 463-9661.

STUDENT IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

(Sample Only)

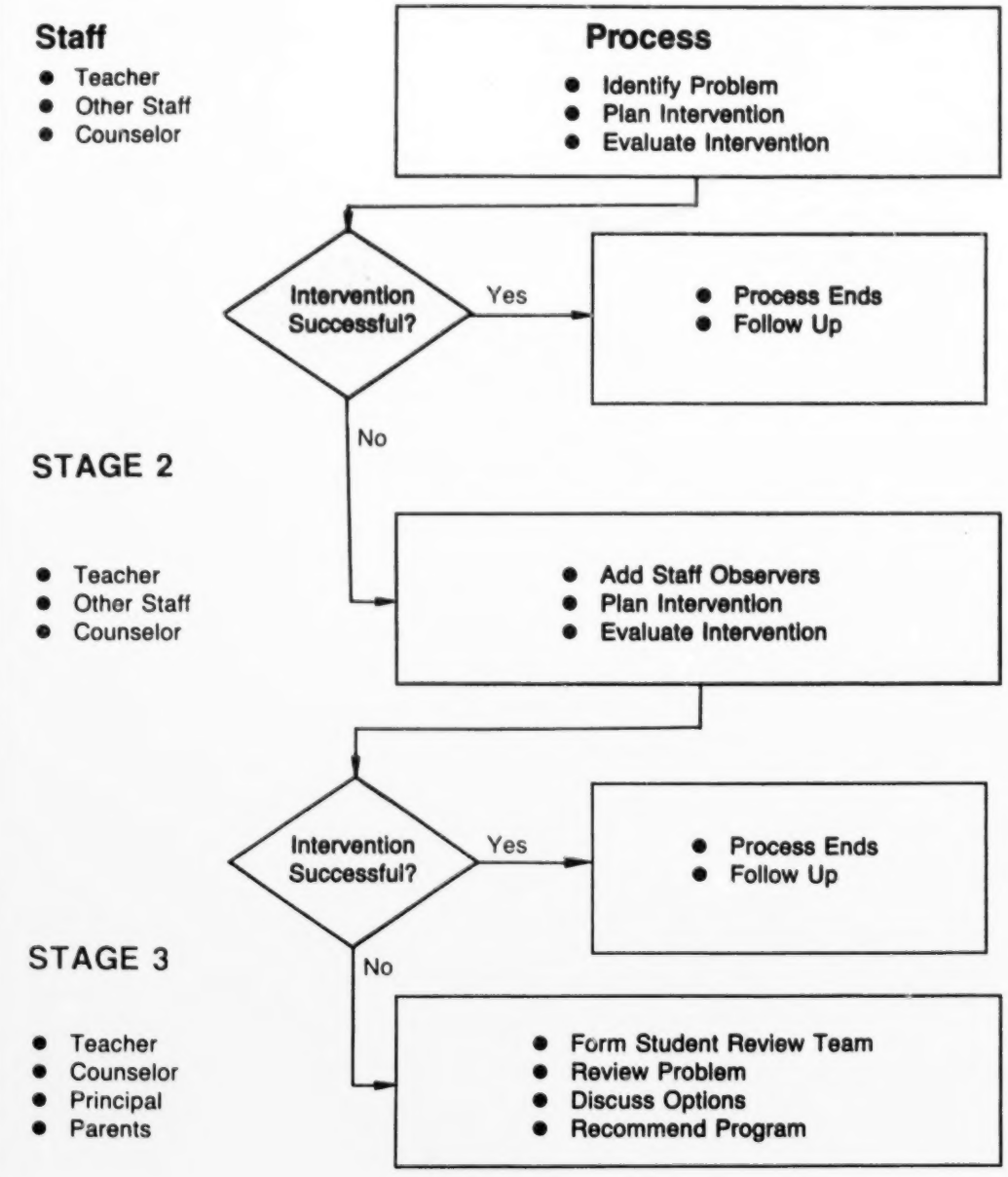

FIGURE 1